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A Conversation With Todd Solondz: "My Movies Aren't For Everybody"

Todd Solondz

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"my movies aren't for everybody (especially people who like them)"

a conversation with todd solondz

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Table of Contents

Introduction 3

Biography: Todd Solondz 5

An Interview with Todd Solondz 8

Filmography 33

Editor's Note 34

Introduction

In October of 1999, my friend Joan and I attended a festival screening of Todd Solondz' new film, *Happiness*. About twenty minutes into the movie it became clear that the audience had divided into two irreconcilable camps: Those who were laughing, and those who wanted to kill the ones who were laughing. At the end of the screening, this seething crowd exploded into a communal argument that rocked the lobby of the Music Box Theatre. The scene was not unique. Two weeks later, Joan and I went back to see the movie again and the same scene played itself out with a new audience.

What struck us both about the experience was not its recurrence but what it told us about the art of provoking thought. If you laughed, you had to ask yourself why you laughed;
if you got angry, you had to address what it was that pushed you to such an extreme. No matter how you felt, you had to examine your relationship to the themes of *Happiness* in order to come to terms with the movie's impact.

For years, critics have been trying to find a common language to define Todd Solondz. They frequently resort to words like "controversial," "dark," "perverse," and "detached." Sometimes they use compliments that sound like insults, other times just the opposite. They attempt comparisons with other independent filmmakers (my favorite is "like Woody Allen but not so relentlessly upbeat") while trying to divine influences from the many great filmmakers who have come before him. None of these comparisons work. The simple truth is that Todd Solondz is unique.He is a filmmaker who has mined an idiom that is particularly and peculiarly his own.

In going over his films to prepare for my interview with him, I found that I had fallen into the same trap. I looked for some way to encapsulate his work with a single phrase.
Of course, this is impossible. At the same time, one expression kept coming back to me: Life affirming. Nowadays, this expression has been made into a cliché by consumerist critics, a shorthand for defining a movie that ends with a loud swell of music and a camera pulling back to reveal a beaten but unbowed character pumping his fists in the air. Before it was this cliché, though, it was a literary definition. It meant a work that accepted the basic contract of life, that it is made up of equal portions of good and evil, loss and gain, sacred and profane. In a day and age when most films are stories of the extraordinary, Todd Solondz makes movies that are about the ordinary hells that we face inside ourselves every day, the ones which define us more certainly than those rare moments of triumph that Hollywood tells us should be our expectation. Although his approach may guarantee his working outside the system, Solondz has persevered, continuing to give us movies that may anger and offend us, but also force us to confront our one constancy - ourselves - in a world that seems less and less in our control with each passing day.

“I never feel comfortable with too many doors open. After Welcome to the Dollhouse, everyone wanted to work with me and have my next movie. The only way to get rid of them was to write a script like Happiness.”

Biography

Among the most unique voices in independent film, Todd Solondz was born in Newark, New Jersey on October 15, 1959. Filmmaking was not among his earliest dreams. Initially, Solondz wanted to become a rabbi but found himself drifting after college. Unhappy with the academic experience, he looked to the arts for a possible future. Moving from musician to playwright with a side trip to photography, Solondz' drifting eventually took him to Los Angeles. Exercising a connection, he found work as a messenger for the Writers Guild of America.

One evening, Solondz attended a screening of thesis films from USC. Sensing that this would make a better future than his current job and desperate to get out of Los Angeles, he applied to and was accepted in the graduate film program at NYU. After a rocky start, Solondz soon found his groove, writing and directing a series of short films. One of these, *Schatt's Last Shot* (1985), a comedy about a hopeless basketball player seeking a sports scholarship at Stanford, resulted in his receiving picture deals both from Twentieth Century Fox and Columbia.

If Solondz expected freedom then he was quickly disavowed of this notion. *Fear, Anxiety and Depression* (1989) is a classic case of a film whose autobiographical elements were so tampered with by its producer and distributor that little was left of its author's signature. The experience was so disillusioning that Solondz walked away from his deal and went to work as an ESL teacher to Russian immigrants (an experience he would later reframe in Happiness).

During this period of self-imposed exile, Solondz reassessed his career and began work on a new script. *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995) was financed and shot outside the system and its success put Solondz on the map. A film of biting hilarity and cruel truths, this tale of eleven year old Dawn "Wienerdog" Wiener (Heather Matarazzo) and her search for respect picked up numerous awards including the C.I.C.A.E. Award at the Berlin Film Festival and the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival.

Once again, the studios came knocking. This time, though, Solondz was not answering the door. Choosing to maintain his status as an independent filmmaker with a high degree of freedom, Solondz moved into even edgier territory. *Happiness* (1998) follows the lives of three sisters (Jane Adams, Lara Flynn Boyle and Cynthia Stevenson) and their very different relationships to the title emotion. Controversy, though, was centered on one character. Bill Maplewood (Dylan Baker) is a successful psychologist and family man. He is also a pedophile who has set his sights on his son's best friend. Playing this story as a "sad comedy," Solondz became, not for

the last time, a lightning rod. The nerve that *Happiness* touched was not political. It was personal and as such, it became the center of arguments and debate for months.

Most filmmakers who find themselves involved in such controversy step back with their next film. Not Solondz. If anything, *Storytelling* (2001) pushed the envelope even further. The film is actually two short subjects, "Fiction" and "Non-fiction" (a third had been planned but was not included in the final release). Although both stories contained elements of controversy, it was "Fiction" that once again put Solondz on the firing line. A Pulitzer Prize-winning author and college professor (Robert Wisdom) is in the habit of seducing his female students. One young woman, Vi (Selma Blair), draws his advance then is humiliated when he sodomizes her while demanding that she hurl racial epithets at him. Knowing that he would be forced to cut this graphic scene or accept an NC-17 rating, Solondz took a novel - and controversial - approach:
He digitally placed a "red box" over the two characters. It was a solution that was typical Solondz: Instead of being forced to not show what he wanted the audience to see, he would make the action clear while at the same time mock the ratings board for its narrow-mindedness.

Solondz' latest film, *Palindromes* (2005) carries on his maverick tradition. Opening with a scene that is sure to shock, even dismay, his longtime fans, Solondz swiftly moves into the story of Aviva, a twelve year old girl who only wants to be loved. To get this, she decides that she must have a baby and sets out on a quest to find someone- anyone - to impregnate her. Stepping into the land of magical realism for the first time, Solondz plays with our sense of identification by casting a different actress in the role of Aviva in each scene. These actresses range in age from nine to forty-two, from tall to short, thin to morbidly obese, white to Asian to African American. In doing so, Solondz moves from the tale of one girl's misguided search to a meditation on identity and acceptance.

Solondz himself is a study in identity. Affable and immediately likable, he is also private, almost to the point of secretive.
A question to him almost invariably is turned back to a query about the person asking the question. A "mask," his oversized glasses, is even a part of his carefully self-styled image. Even this trademark, though, is one he now uses only sparingly. Once these became his signature he pulled back from wearing them too often, choosing not to be recognized on the street. Solondz is equally reticent about his work. He never discusses his upcoming projects and prefers to remain reasonably quiet about his past work.
Like any great storyteller, he would rather let his stories stand on their own.

And, like their author, they do.

An Interview with Todd Solondz

Palindromes, Shayna Levine as Aviva
and Stephen Adly Guirgis as Earl
Photo: Macall Polay

Interview

Ron Falzone (RF): It seems that every time critics come up against your work they resort to some basic words that never seem fully appropriate to me. One of the most oft-mentioned is "dark." How do you respond to that word?

Todd Solondz (TS): I don't see that as positive or a negative, it's just neutral. I accept that some people may find this material dark. Whatever it implies, it doesn't have a whole lot of meaning for me.

RF: But do you get that word a lot.

TS: If I'm dealing with subjects that are very delicate, and parts of human nature that are more troubling, I don't have a problem if someone wants to apply dark. But as I say it's neutral, I couldn't say that-why would I complain about this? To some extent, with all my movies, people will say some lovely things, and some will say horrible things. A lot of people may say to me that you're only making something meaningful if people tell you how horrible your movie is. If they're correct, it gives me no pleasure. I'm certainly familiar with epithets that I'm sure some of you have already heard said of me: Cruel, mean-spirited, cynical, misanthropic, loathsome, it goes on, and I don't get any pleasure from it. It is painful and that's why I don't Google myself. (laughter) I'm not a masochist. But it is counterbalanced. There are people who say lovely things, call me a genius and things like that.

RF: A lot of times critics fall are unsure whether to call your work comedy or melodrama. How do you perceive it?

TS: If I had to categorize it, I would call it sad comedy. And I think *Palindromes* is the saddest of all my comedies, but I think that my movies have often generated a divided response. In one respect there may be half the audience that says, "That's so funny. Right on," and then the second half is angry at the first half: "How can you laugh? This is too sad, too painful." For me it's both. The comedy emerges from the pathos, and vice versa. They're inextricably connected. It's not a question of throwing in a joke or throwing in something dramatic. They're of a piece for me.

RF: One of the sequences in your films has always fascinated me is the scene in *Happiness* where Bill is putting the knockout drops on the tuna salad for the little boy. The scene itself is frightening and very sad. We're constantly being reminded that he is preparing to rape this child. At the same time, the staging of it, the quick cutting and moving about the kitchen gives it a comic rhythm that ironically underpins the fact that it's moving to something much darker and harsher than that.

TS: Well, you know, it is tuna salad (laughs). To me, the tuna salad was really the glass of milk that Cary Grant gives to Joan Fontaine in *Suspicion*. I was trying to find a way of dramatizing it so that one's response...so that there was a kind of jitteriness. Obviously there's a certain implication here because many people may find themselves in a kind of identification with Bill Maplewood. We might be saying "hurry up and take a bite out of it," even though we know the horrific thing he has in mind. It's about having two impulses going up against each other and creating a kind of friction. A kind of charge happens that I think makes people a little uncertain about how to respond to what's taking place. I think you can see this dynamic at play in all my films but it may manifest in different ways.

RF: Your first major feature, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, is a wonderful film and certainly a very different view of being eleven years old than the one we're used to seeing in the movies. *Happiness*, though, is the one where we start to see a connecting thread. For me, it was in that balance between the darkness and the humor. I remember being deeply attracted to *Happiness* while at the same time having a great deal of difficulty in figuring out how to react to what was going on.

TS: It is a tricky thing. Oftentimes, we make something that is intended to be comedic, and we like it of course when people laugh. There's nothing sadder than a comedy that doesn't make people laugh. I find that when people do laugh, the laughter is a tricky thing to evaluate. My movies are very serious and troubling. Maybe half of the audience does not want to laugh and would maybe like to watch it without hearing any laughter. And this is just as true as those who are laughing who might be mystified at the humorlessness of the others. And it's very tricky because certainly there are times when people laugh when I think it is inappropriate. There have been times when people have approached me... I remember at one film festival, after *Happiness* played, a young man came up to me-and it's true, he wasn't very

sober -but he went on and on and spoke about it in ways I wouldn't repeat here. He thought it was really cool and hip. What troubled me was that he seemed to be getting out of it was something that was antithetical to what I had in mind. Clearly there's something of a comedic impulse at work, but there's nothing cool about a father raping little boys. It is unequivocally unacceptable behavior. And sometimes I feel that people may be laughing at the expense of these characters. That happens from time to time. As we know there are all kinds of laughter. When *Storytelling* came out, I made a point of saying that my movies aren't for everyone, especially people who like them (laughter). And I said that because I was so troubled by this person who seemed to love *Happiness* for all the wrong reasons. We know that when we watch a movie and people laugh they do so for all sorts of different reasons, and some laughter isn't good, it just isn't right. A laughter can be a signal to your neighbor to say "I get the joke," it can be a laughter of recognition, and in some ways it's hard to articulate these different kinds of laughter.

I don't subscribe to the belief that the audience knows best. I think, "I made the movie. I think I know best." But I listen to how an audience responds after I finish each movie.

RF: Do you test screen your movies before they're released?

TS: I do test the movie out with audiences. You know those silly cards people check off? Rate one to ten: How do you like this character? These are kind of pointless and meaningless. But it is valuable to see where an audience laughs, where they don't. Where you feel they're rapt and where you sense they're drifting off to sleep. There's something that you can pick up from watching a cut of your movie before it's finished that you can't quite achieve if you're watching it yourself for the eight-hundredth time. I trust audiences in certain ways but it's a very tricky thing evaluating them just as it's very tricky to trust a filmmaker like myself. I really wouldn't hold much credence in anything I say. It's the movie. Everything I say here...I mean...I know you can take of it what you will but I don't think you should trust it. (laughter)

RF: I read a comment of yours that on going into the opening of *Welcome to the Dollhouse* you were extremely nervous about the audience's reaction to it.

TS: I was fearful of it, but since then I haven't been so fearful. At the time I was concerned that as a guy making a movie involving an eleven year old girl that included the subject of rape and doing it with sort of comedy, that a lot of women would take issue with me. But I couldn't think about it too much. I had to think of being true to the reality I was setting up. True to the particularities.

RF: So it's safe to say that you don't worry about being "politically correct."

TS: I have no interest in creating anything prescriptive. I'm not interested in creating characters who act the way they should act. I don't want to tell them how they should behave. I'd rather show what's revelatory in how she reacts when the bully comes up to her and says "You'd better show up at three o'clock or I'm going to rape you." It's just real to me that she would show up at three o'clock. I believe that. She would listen to that bully, given who she was.
The trouble happens only if I'm not really being true to the integrity of this world that I'm setting up.

RF: Actually, when that movie first came out I was surprised, shocked even when Brandon says "I'm going to rape you at three o'clock." Then they go out to that fenced in area and she says, "If you're going to rape me, I have to be home at four thirty." The scene did feel real right to me and I didn't know why. It's been a long time since I was eleven, and I've never been an eleven year old girl.
Four years ago, though, my niece who was thirteen at the time and I went to a Blockbuster. I said, "Just pick out what you want," and she went straight down the aisle and picked up *Welcome to the Dollhouse*. I said, "I don't know about that." She gave me that exasperated, "duh" look that a thirteen year old gives to an adult and said, "I've already seen it twice." So we went home and watched it together. We talked about it afterwards and almost everything that Dawn goes through in that movie-including having boys saying things to her like "I'm gonna rape you,"-was all stuff she'd been through. Those were things she understood. I was very struck by that because normally when you see a movie about a young girl the filmmaker is directing it through a mist of nostalgia. They're directing it from a distance and making it pretty. There was nothing nostalgic or pretty in

Welcome to the Dollhouse. It was very real, very in the moment. Much of this comes from the casting of the extraordinary Heather Matarazzo as Dawn. How did you work with her to capture that sense?

TS: Casting, casting, casting. It's all about getting the right actors. And the right part and the right time. Then you set up the right situation so things can happen. It's not rehearsal. I never rehearse any of my movies.
My audition...that's my rehearsal. I've read about others who spend a week rehearsing, but I just wouldn't know what to do. Also, I'm afraid that if I did have all that rehearsal time then the actors would see how little I know and it's important to appear intimidating. (laughter) Once you're there on the set there's no time so I have to be prepared and know what I want. Film is too expensive to improvise much You have to just know what you're looking for.

RF: Such as?

TS: To know what qualities and what limitations an actor has. To know what qualities this character brings, not the qualities you wish he could bring. But to accept the qualities this particular actor brings. Heather happens to be a gifted actress. For me, when Brandon calls Dawn a cunt and she says, "Why do you think I'm a cunt?," it is so beautiful the way she says it. For me, that's the poetry of her innocence. It's in the way she uses this vile word. It's about these different elements that work against each other and with each other.

RF: Given that Dawn Wiener is brought up in *Palindromes*, did you initially plan to use Heather again in that film?

TS: I wanted to work with her again and I wanted her to reprise Dawn Wiener in *Palindromes*. I wanted her to come back for *Storytelling* and *Palindromes*. I begged her but she refused me. She said she never wanted to play that part again, so I had to accept that reality. But she's the only actor I've ever begged. Casting really is everything.
The actors will make you look good.

RF: What about Daria Kalinina, the young girl who plays Dawn's little sister? Were you able to work with her in the same way as Heather?

TS: Daria was a little more limited and I was also very concerned because she was new to the country. She was Ukrainian and had only been here for six months so I was concerned about her accent. With Heather, I would only have to come in occasionally to modify bits and pieces. She could take care of herself, whereas the little sister...I remember having to go line by line, to give her line readings and to make sure she could just mimic me. Anything. There are no rules, whatever works to get what you need from your performers.

RF: Before we go any further, I want you to tell the audience about *Palindromes*; more to the point, what you're willing to tell about it.

TS: In essence, it's a very simple story. It's the story of a thirteen year old girl named Aviva who's on a quest for love. She imagines that having a baby will provide her this unconditional love that she feels she's not getting elsewhere.
The motor of the dramatic thrust is the question of what do you do if your thirteen year old daughter comes home pregnant and she wants to keep the baby. It's an impossible dilemma that opens up all kinds of politically charged questions. And there's a radical conceit at the center of it that is used to dramatize some of the themes here of the story.

RF: If you look at your four films, *Dollhouse* and *Palindromes* become the parenthesis with *Happiness* and *Storytelling* in between. In many ways a lot of the same themes are flowering in a very different and interesting way in *Palindromes* that got started in *Welcome to the Dollhouse*.

“The only thing I really liked about these (studio) deals was telling people I had them”

TS: I've always said all my movies are love stories in some sense. Whether it's unrequited or forbidden love, or self love, they're all love stories of a kind. All I can do is hope that people will show up and bring an open mind to the experience and not a vacant one. It's true that a liberal mind is not always the same thing as an open one. I do set out to prod a little bit, to challenge the audience, in some sense to force them to reevaluate or reassess some of the preconceptions and myths that we all carry.

RF: In the film, you're operating from a fairly complex metaphor of the palindrome; that we as people are the same forward as we are in reverse. We have our own individual basis and that this doesn't change regardless of what experiences we go through. This is expressed quite directly by a character late in the film.

TS: Mark Wiener.

RF: Yes, by Mark Wiener and in quite a remarkable scene. To what degree is Mark's expression your own expression? Do you believe that theme or is that Mark's?

TS: There is what I call the palindromic part of ourselves that does resist change, that stays the same, that is inescapable, and Mark seemed like a good voice to carry this across. He's a little grimmer than me, but I do think our inability to change can be a freeing thing. To accept one's limitations and failures can be liberating. Mark sees it more with a sense of doom. But he says to this character whom we have seen metamorphose into all these different shapes and sizes that it doesn't matter if you gain fifty pounds or if you have a sex change, it really makes no difference. There is an essential part of yourself that is constant. There's only so much delusion you can live with. If I look back at that time of life, certainly I see that I'm not that much different from what I was at ten years old. And, so in the movie there is kind of a loosely metaphorical thing with the palindrome. It's a tricky ride with all sorts of ambiguity.

The movie does prod you in certain ways so that you might say, "Wait, is this pro-life?" or "Is this pro-choice?" And I'm not going to tell anyone where I stand, I don't like to do that. If I say if I'm pro-choice, then my audience tends to be a pro-choice audience. They tend to be liberal-minded. I don't want them to relax and say, "Okay, it's okay, he's pro choice so I can relax." I rather them have to work it out. And if I'm pro-choice than anyone who is pro-life won't come to see my movie. But am I pro-choice? If one believes in the possibility of choice. It's something of a philosophical point that Mark brings up at the end of the movie; the nature of free will. Of course, if you're of a religious bent, you must believe in free will in order to accept faith. And those who are more atheist-minded accept the notion that we have our...Wait, what is this? I'm going off...

RF: I know, I'm letting you take this one as far as you want to go with it.

TS: I just feel that I have all these film students and that you've got great philosophy teachers who will be much more useful and interesting than anything I have to say.

RF: You do something in *Palindromes* that you haven't yet tried. You're moving into magical realism in the way you approach the story. That was what really surprised me the most in watching it. By the time we move to the third scene of the film, we begin to realize that we're not in a world that we can see through absolute reality. It made me think-engage, really-more as I was going through it. I didn't have anything comfortable to grab on to. I thought that was a great strength.

TS: I always want to get at things from a different angle. Things I haven't yet done. The movie has certain fairy tale storybook reference and certainly *The Night of the Hunter* is a big thing in this one.

Palindromes, Matthew Faber as Mark Wiener
(Photo: Macall Polay)

RF: Can you talk about your own approach to filmmaking? The why and the how.

TS: I'm sure you make short films here. It's so hard to make these short films. If it's anything like when I made short films, it's a nightmare. You work with all your friends too intimately and you get to know them much better than you ever wanted to and it's just so stressful. And I think you live with this delusion that things will be better when you can actually work professionally but it's all horrible. I don't believe in giving false hope. (laughter) My personality wasn't designed to be a director. I don't get pleasure from having fifty people working under me. I don't get this adrenaline high. It's just stress. The first morning of the shoot when the alarm goes off at 3:30 in the morning and you have to be on set to have enough time to maximize my sunlight? I don't need this. It's so unpleasant. I don't enjoy it. For me, the price of making movies is I have to direct them. I write what I do and as I write I'm imagining how I'm going to film it. They're tied into each other, the process of writing and directing. But I'm also thinking about budget. I rewrote the first twenty pages of this movie to bring it down a million dollars. Unfortunately, I'm cheap so I don't hire anyone outside. I do it all myself. That's the one thing I found when I was a student filmmaker. I was always fearful of so many things to avoid. For example, I don't think I ever had more than three actors on any given day because it was just too much to have to deal with. And I always designed the story around what locations I could get for free. But you can't approach your short as a student film, you can't approach it as an exercise. You have to take it seriously. Everything you put on film you must take seriously. It all matters. When people say, "Oh, it doesn't matter, it's just a student film," I think they're wrong. I think it all matters. If you shoot it in your dorm room and you dress it up like it's a boutique, it's going to look like a dorm room that's dressed up to look like a boutique. Film is very literal-minded. You have to be smart and find ways, because it is so costly, even if you're not shooting it on film. Paying for lunch for the crew, everything, it all costs so much money. The trick, really is to come up with concepts, that whether you have a budget that's five thousand dollars, or fifty thousand dollars, that it would be virtually the same movie. It wouldn't be improved by having fifty thousand dollars. You're making a movie that was designed, that has come into full bloom as a five thousand dollar piece. To pretend you have ten thousand when you have five thousand, that becomes problematic because it

will show. That was sort of the genius of *The Blair Witch Project*. Those filmmakers knew they didn't have the money and they used the limitations as an asset. It's supposed to look really crappy. It's supposed to have that handheld video look. It was designed in such a way that it would have been a much worse film if they had actually shot it on thirty-five. If they really had the resources of studio films, they would have had a much less successful movie. So, it's about using your limitations and transforming them into an asset.

RF: These sound like good lessons from film school. What moved you toward going to film school?

TS: I was in Los Angeles and I worked as a messenger for the Writer's Guild because I had a connection. Someone had that job just quit. I remember there was a program of thesis films made by UCLA students and I went to this evening of short films. I remember learning about how this one was going on to a deal with a studio and that one was making a feature so I was really curious to see these movies. And I saw the evening of shorts and they were terrible, just terrible movies. I was just dumbfounded. I thought if they have careers from this than I've got to go to film school because if I can't do better... (laughter) If I can't do something I feel is more engaging than these movies then I'll cut my losses and find something else to do. So, when other people say, "I saw Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* and ever since that I've had to be a filmmaker," I know it was really that evening of terrible short films that gave me my incentive.

RF: What ws the experience like when you finally got there?

TS: I was a grad when I went to film school, I was an English major in college. I had failed at so many things in my life before I went to film school. I wanted to be a musician but I had no talent and I accepted that. And when I was in college I wrote so many plays, all mercifully unproduced. And I do love photography but I just can't touch a camera. In fact, when I went to film school, I had special dispensation. I didn't have to touch the camera there. I would discuss everything in detail and work through with whatever camera person I was dealing with. I don't know why. I just couldn't understand what a shutter was so I didn't get as much as I should have out of school. Before I went to film school, I took a few years off. I thought I'd never go back to school. Oh God, I thought never, never, never, but there I was.

When I did finally go to film school it was a lot less competitive. I think it's much harder to get into film school today. I found myself in the NYU graduate program. My first month in the film program I thought, "This is a joke." I couldn't believe what a terrible school I thought it was. I just was spending my time looking for jobs. Anything that I could do because I was planning on dropping out within the first month. But they gave me some assignments to start making short films, and it was from making these shorts that I developed my confidence. I did a two-minute film, then an eight-minute film, then a ten-minute film. And the thing for me that was moving and remarkable was they were well received by my classmates. Suddenly, I wasn't failing. Things clicked And it's a simple human response: When people tell you, you're good at something, you think, "Well, gee, maybe I am good at this." That gave me a certain confidence.

RF: Do you ever go back and look at your own student films?

TS: No, I have not. If I'd thought of it I could have brought a student film and shown it here. I just didn't think of it, probably because I'm traveling. Who wants to schlep it around?

RF: Nowadays, film students are confronted with the choice between working in the system or working outside as an independent. Certainly your career has been in the independent world. Was this choice made during film school or after?

TS: When I was in college, there was no such thing as an independent filmmaker. John Sayles made his first film when I was in college and I continued thereafter. I looked at him as some kind of role model. Even though we may not share a great deal artistically, I have a great respect for his ability to make a small intelligent movie outside the Hollywood system and make a living that way. But today, with digital technology, it's like when the typewriter was invented. It's sort of democratizing the access to filmmaking. Now everyone has a video

An Interview with Todd Solondz

camera and you're only limited by your imagination. If you're smart and persistent and stick to it, any one of you can come up with a feature-length film. This is something that was inconceivable when I was in college. And you can go to film festivals with it. Now there're film festivals in every state where you can meet other film makers. I missed out on all of that, but I think that should give you encouragement. Don't get me wrong: If you're serious about your work, it's going to be hard. And frustrating. The problem is that you're constantly reminded that the minute you stop trying no one will care. It's over. Nobody cares of you make another movie, nobody. That's kind of the hard reality you're up against. I can go and say to myself people do care, but there are millions of other filmmakers so there isn't any trouble filling up the screen. If you're up against that kind of hard reality, you have to decide what matters to you.

RF: Speaking of realities, what kind did you learn with *Fear, Anxiety, and Depression*, your first film?

TS: I ended up having a great time at NYU and I just making those short films was such a joy. (pause) No it wasn't, no (laughter) I went there but it wasn't fun. I dropped out in fact, as most people did at the time. It just didn't seem worth it after I'd done two years. I was in a strange position of making these shorts that generated a big response. NYU had a Best of the Year show and one of my films was selected to be part of it. It happened to be the only comedy. And so-oh, it's just the old tiresome clichéd story-I had these two studios, Fox and Columbia, both battling over me. Soon I owed six movies and I hadn't done anything. I had a three-picture writing and directing deal. The two studios went head to head and it went on for a year with lawyers. The only thing I really liked about these deals was telling people I had them. It was a very painful time for me and I knew I wasn't going to get any sympathy from my classmates. It wasn't as seductive as it could be. I did make a film and it was a horrible experience. It was ill-conceived and ill-begotten and if I had been more mature or wiser it would never had been finished. I never even watched it once it was finished. I don't mention the title,

because it's not even the title that I wanted. It was a horrible experience for so many reasons, one of them being that I was just very slow at growing up and it sent me out of the business so to speak. That's fine, I thought, so I applied to the Peace Corps. I was rejected, but I tried a number of organizations. I ended up finally spending a few years teaching English as a second language. Then, after a number of years, I wrote *Welcome to the Dollhouse* to redeem myself from this nightmare. I didn't want that last movie to have the last word if I could help it. I was still paranoid. I thought *Welcome to the Dollhouse* might make me be some kind of director for hire for after school specials. (laughter) You're laughing, but when this movie was finished, we showed it to different producers reps. They didn't watch the whole movie, just part of it, then said, "You know, this is for a children's channel." It wasn't just my insecurities or paranoia, people, I showed it to John Pierson who is somewhat known, and he said, "I loved it." I said, "Do you think someone would actually want to buy it or release it?" He said no. It was very unexpected, but of course, life changing experiences usually are. Suddenly, there I was with this movie that took on a life of its own and has opened up so many doors and made so many things possible. That said, I never feel comfortable with too many doors open. After *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, everyone wanted to work with me and have my next movie. The only way to get rid of them was to write a script like *Happiness*.

TS: It's not like you write the truth. I don't know what that even really means. It's a process of discovery for me. The question was what really compels me to put pen to paper. It's a great question. It's not fun, what is it that makes me pursue this process. I find that after I finish this within the first draft I have a sense of this is what I was getting at. This is what it's about. And yet I find once I'm there on the set with the actors and locations, it's evolved into something else. It's not-it's not, this is what it is, I see, I get it. And in the cutting room I find myself chopping away at it and distilling some things that it's taking on a different shape. I'm kind of chasing it all the time. And then when it's over I'm still connecting certain dots. So when people ask me, "did the movie turned out the way you imagined it would?" I always have to say no it never does. If it does

and I'm lucky, it turns out better. If you are a writer at all, that's your job is to make these leaps, these leaps of imagination. To write, for anyone, as long as they're human is someone you try to get under the skin. And be truthful to reality, the rules and so forth. That you're setting up there.

RF: I was wondering if you could talk more about how you begin the writing process. If you begin with a character or a plotline idea or a structure like *Storytelling* is set up. Or if you even begin with just an idea for a scene. You know, *Happiness* and *Storytelling* start out with these very singular sorts of scenes and then do you go from there and then just let it unfold naturally?

TS: It's a mysterious thing. I'm not trying to be difficult, I really don't know. It's just...pieces come out to you. You may have snippets, it may be dialogue it may be things are happening out in the world, news, it may be memories, things you've observed. Images. You know, there are no rules to any of this. Some people use outlines and index cards and plot out their story and come up with something very effective that way. I would never presume to give any advice on this because everyone works in his peculiar way. The thing is that everyone says, yes, I want to be a director, I want to be a director, but the reality is you need a script. And if you don't have script, it's hard to be a director. You know, being a director, just going off on a tangent here, you know, it's being a director means that you spend very little of your lifetime actually directing actors. Really. It's really about time management. It's about, there's a clock, there's a budget, and it's making these choices. Can I afford another take? Yes, you can get an extra take, but if you get the extra take we lose sunlight and we need to get that other shot. It's making those calls it's about knowing when an actor is delivering and when an actor is an actor you should fire. It's a very scary thing when it's just not working. And that's the thing you only experience by actually doing it. I went off on a tangent but I think I answered your question.

RF: I'd like to open it up to questions from the audience.

Student Question (SQ): You said you don't usually rehearse, that your rehearsal is the casting session. In the case of *Happiness*, the father's a child molester. That's a very difficult character for an actor to play. How does that come out on the set when you haven't had rehearsal with the actors. Do you spend more time on the set?

“My personality wasn’t designed to be a director. I don’t get pleasure from having fifty people working under me. For me, the price of making movies is I have to direct them.”

TS: Just because a character is a pedophile doesn't automatically make it a more difficult character than one who is just a receptionist. It's a question of the way in which you approach your characters. You can't define them as "the pedophile" or "the receptionist." There's no life there. I happen to work with great actors. They just make you look good. They really do. I had that climatic scene in *Happiness*, for example, with the little boy and the father (where the father tries to explain his pedophilia to his son). We shot the little boy first. He was a natural, a very wonderful enigmatic little boy. And then we shot the father. Dylan (Baker) was giving more as an actor when we did his shot. And we saw what happened, the kid's performance was very effective, but colored by Dylan giving him more. Well, Dylan felt really guilty about having saved so much, so we had to turn the camera back again to the little boy who was now was responding in a very sympathetic way to the father. I had to capture that. It turned out to be a rehearsal because it was out of focus and we had to reshoot it two weeks later. (laughter) Some people find they get a lot out of rehearsal but I wouldn't know. I've never done it. I use my auditions as a time to evaluate what an actor can do and cannot do and the qualities he or she has and so forth. Then you make a leap. You hope you chose the right person. Sometimes it may be a surprise in a good way and sometimes not so.

SQ: My question sort of goes along with that. When you're doing a movie like *Happiness* and you have such a controversial subject, how do you approach the child actors and their parents? Do you leave them out of certain descriptions?

TS: I'll tell you. I've dealt with kinds and delicate subject matter in all of my movies. Quite simply, if you find a kid who you like and think is right for the part then the next step is to meet with the parents and show them the script. You have to be an open book about this and let them know what you have in mind. What your intentions are and so forth. They can decide whether or not they want to make that leap of faith in you. It's imperative, of course, that they take pride in their child's appearance in the film. It's paramount. It's just a very time-consuming process that I've gone through with each and every kid who has been involved in delicate material in my movies. The parents are always on the set and so forth. I don't have kids but if I did and he was clamoring to

act I would rather have him act in one of my movies. I would never allow him to act in a commercial for the Gap or detergents, to be a child selling consumer goods. To me, that's the obscenity.

SQ: I was wondering how you deal with censorship. It seems to be a big issue for you, most obviously with *Storytelling* and the red box. Was that the first thing you came up with or was there anything else?

TS: I take pride in the big red box. It's the only studio movie that's ever been made with a big red box in the middle of it. At the time, no studio would release a movie that had an NC 17 rating. They would have nothing more than an 'R'. I knew this material was a little dicey and wasn't confident that I would get an 'R' rating. To be safe, I put in the contract that I would be able to use beats and/or bars that would secure an 'R' rating. So, predictably, when we get to the point of finishing the movie, the rating people would not approve it without the big red box that I put in there. If I had not used the red box then I would have had to cut something out. The audience wouldn't know what it never saw. My philosophy was that I wanted the audience to know what it wasn't allowed to see. You have to realize this is the only country in the world where you can see the big red box in the middle of *Storytelling*. No place else in the world do they have a red box. They wanted me to cut it up to get into Blockbuster because you have to have an 'R' rating to get in there. I said you can have an unrated version provided there is an 'R' rated version as well. I was not going to use any scissors on this and I said you can use beeps and bars. I don't know why they didn't take me up on it. They should have. With *Storytelling*, if you rent the DVD there's a button you press, Todd's version or the family version. And so that the family can watch it all together with a big red box on it. (laughter) A lot of people cover things and shoot things in different ways to cover themselves for the ratings. I just don't waste my time with that, with language or anything. I don't do "friggin'." I just don't put my actors through that. It's infantilizing and silly.

SQ: I was just curious, what sort of filmmakers, films, or movements did you identify with when you were growing up?

Palindromes, Alexander Brickel as Peter Paul and Sharon Wilkins as Aviva
(Photo: Macall Polay)

TS: Gee, I didn't even know what a film movement was. I was not precocious in that way. I grew up watching TV. I read some. I would be taken to the movies, to the equivalent of the multiplex-type studio movies from time to time, provided they had a 'G' or 'PG' rating. It wasn't until I went to college that I really discovered and fell in love with film, that I discovered the larger world. What shaped me? The TV would be on for four hours on school days and eight to ten hours on the weekend. So that was the primary force in the shaping of what I am. My earliest movie recollection was '64 and '65. It was a double header. I saw *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music* and it was such profound joy. It stuck with me for years, to the chagrin of my siblings. Things like the French New Wave and the German new wave, I got that was when I was in college. I did a lot of catching up because I was so socially inept in college. I spent so much time watching movies.

SQ: I'm wondering how personal an expression your films are or if that's even important to you.

TS: In a sense, I find the best thing is not to focus on something like the so-called personal expression. What I think matters most is that you want to make sure you can get excited. Of course, as you're excited by this material you wonder, "Will any one else be? Is this some kind of solipsistic exercise?" Or does it, in fact, communicate something to larger worlds. When you see *Palindromes*, you may wonder what was going through my head. It's much more interesting for me to know what's going through your head as you engage with the work and how you're understanding the shifts. I try to put out movies that I want to see and I hope others want to see. If you want to call this personal expression I won't dispute that but I'm always leery of falling into a narcissistic indulgence.

SQ: I noticed that a couple of things you were saying hinted at a cynicism about American consumer culture. I was wondering if you feel that we as American filmmakers, have some responsibility to the way we represent ourselves in the world at large.

TS: That's a big question. Like it or not, America is the most powerful and richest country in the world and it's like all things powerful and rich in that a lot of people don't like us. The thing that is important to recognize is how insulated we really are. There are so few foreign films that get exposure here, so few books that get translated here. All of our work gets translated and disseminated all over the world so there is an imbalance here that perverts an understanding and makes a mess of how we relate to and engage with the rest of the world. Part of our job is to define the condition of the world we live in. As a filmmaker, your job is to be receptive to the signals, to those things that are out there to see and to see what fresh angle you can find to examine these things. Look, in my movies there are all sorts of taboos but, really, they're on TV every day of the week. I mean, newspapers, radio and so forth. It's not like I'm creating these subjects. We're assaulted by them all the time. We have the obscenities on the news everyday. The Teri Schiavo story, there's obscenity all over the place with that one. If your eyes are open, it's not too much of a strain to discover. Everything that you live and everything that you experience when you're young, you want to reject and rebel. That's healthy. But you want to escape and forage and find a sense of who you are. And you'll find that as you get older you'll see that things are always in flux, always shifting. I got off on a tangent, didn't I? (laughter)

SQ: You mentioned earlier how you finished film school and that around that time you were approached by the studio on the strength of your shorts. It's a fantasy for a lot of us. There's all this fascination with the million and one pathways to get in. What are the qualities the studios liked about you and made you desirable to them?

TS: It's very simple. If you make a short film that people actually enjoy, it's a huge achievement. It's one thing to show your friends and they're like, "Isn't this great?" and another thing when you show it to the real world and their eyes glaze over. One of the first lessons I learned came when I had an assignment to make a two-minute music film. The thing that was so startling to me was how quickly a movie could really bore you. How really in two minutes it was, "What happened? I watch TV and it doesn't happen like this!" (laughter) What is

this ingredient, this impulse that makes me want to turn the page and keep reading And I think that the studio is looking for the same thing. They want to see something fresh and engaging that makes you want to keep watching it and enjoying it. Look, if Hollywood is able to provide that kind of entertainment, we'd be in a very different business. I always say that the business of Hollywood is very entertaining but, unfortunately, not the entertainment. But it's really not about having a 30-minute thing and having it look real professional and looks like you did it in 35 and that you had this lens they imported from Austria. You can spend enormous amounts of money and it makes no difference. Everyone knows that what they're gonna see is not a professional work, so why try to fool them? You're not going to. The important thing is that you have to have a hook that'll bring in the audience. That's when you know you've got something.

SQ: I'm curious about how much of what we're hearing onscreen is location sound effects and how much is ADR. It's always difficult for actors to go into this sterile environment and say dialogue. But because of your subject matter and the script, I imagine it's much more challenging for them than on some Hollywood blockbuster.

TS: Very, very little ADR. I avoid it at all costs and I only use ADR if I absolutely need it. I can practically count the lines that I've ADR'ed. I prefer location sound as imperfect as it is than what I get in ADR.

SQ: Will you continue to work as a writer/director? Are you ever compelled to write something and have someone else direct it? Or to direct something that someone else has written?

TS: Well, I certainly would never write for someone else. I just...It's just too hard. If someone's gonna screw it up, I'm going to be the one. I'm not gonna give it to someone else. My priority is my own material so that's where I put my energies. There are a lot of things that interest me, that I think that I could do. The well hasn't quite run dry. Now whether or not I ever get to do those movies, who knows? I don't assume anything. I'm just grateful that I'm able to survive and for what I've done so far.

Photo: Eric Davis, Columbia Chronicle

“My movies aren’t for everyone, especially people who like them.”

Filmography

Director/Writer

Palindromes (2004)

Storytelling (2001)

Happiness (1998)

Welcome to the Dollhouse (1995, also producer)

Fear, Anxiety & Depression (1989)

Schatt's Last Shot (1985)

Actor

As Good as It Gets (1997) as Man on Bus

Fear, Anxiety & Depression (1989) as Ira Ellis

Married to the Mob (1988) as The Zany Reporter

In Transit (1986)

Schatt's Last Shot (1985) as Ezra Schatt

Editor's Note

Writer/Director Todd Solondz visited the Film & Video Department of Columbia College Chicago on Monday, March 21, 2005. This event as well as this booklet was produced by the Visiting Director Program of the department's directing concentration.

Although the interview that makes up this booklet may appear to be the work of one person, it is the result of a good deal of planning and execution done by a large number of people. Todd Solondz' visit was no exception. Special thanks are owed to Film & Video Department Chair Bruce Sheridan as well as Chap Freeman, Joan McGrath, Eileen Coken, Sandy Cuprisin, and Charlie Celander, all of whom gave support, both administrative and personal. Liz Antoine took on the task of typing the transcripts of this conversation despite the fact that she was about to go into production. Jennifer Ruvalcava was our unflappable house manager, a fact made more impressive when one realizes that this is event was the first student program to "sell out" in the department's new Film Row Cinema. Ben Steger once again stepped up to the plate when an ace sound person was needed. John Farbrother, Rachael Hanna and all the people at the College's Creative and Printing Services put in many hours of unsung work getting this and our other booklets together, frequently with very difficult schedules. And, most certainly, this event never would have happened if Anthony Kaufman had not provided our avenue to Todd Solondz nor Dan Goldberg at Wellspring our access to his schedule. All of these persons are gratefully acknowledged.

Of course the greatest thanks must go to our guest. For a man whose reticence is well known, Todd Solondz proved to be an open, warm and engaging guest. Always honest, he managed to convey some hard won wisdom in a way that drew the rapt attention of his audience. Visibly excited by his interaction with our students, Solondz stayed long after the interview to take private questions and give advice. It was this generosity of spirit that may have made the strongest impression on many of those who came. Hopefully, it is a generosity that he will again share with us in the future.

Past Participants in the Visiting Directors Program include:

Harold Ramis (Inaugural Visiting Director)*

Margarethe Von Trotta*

Volker Schlondorff

Ousmane Sembene

Albert Maysles

Masahiro Kobayashi

Pablo Berger

Piero Sanna

Regge Life

Sally Nemeth

*** Interview booklets for these Visiting Directors are available at 1104 S. Wabash in the 3rd floor reception area and in Room 701J. They are also available at the security desk at the Directing Stages at 1415 S. Wabash.**

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